

# WOMEN AND WATERPIPE SMOKING: LIBERAL SYMBOL OR SEXUAL ALLURE?

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**Background and Aims:** Despite emerging evidence on its adverse health effects, waterpipe tobacco smoking (WTS) is becoming more prevalent than that of cigarettes among women and girls in Syria. In the face of a strong taboo against female smoking, adult family members appear to be more permissive towards women smoking waterpipe than cigarettes. The aim of this paper is to assess whether seductive images and sexual allure themes are present in women and men discourses about waterpipe.

**Methods:** Nineteen focus group discussions (FGDs) and eleven in-depth interviews were conducted in Aleppo, Syria in 2008. Men and women, waterpipe smokers and non-smokers were recruited from both urban and rural areas. Separate FGDs were conducted by gender, age group, and waterpipe smoking status. The discussions were thematically analyzed. The main themes were the image of women smoking waterpipe and men's attraction to these women. Moreover, the sexual allure conveyed through waterpipe smoking, as well as WTS as a symbol of emancipation, were illustrated.

**Results:** Focus group participants stated that women smoke waterpipe to draw the attention of men, that women smoking waterpipe are attractive, and described the specific communication used to convey sex appeal while smoking waterpipe. Smoking waterpipe is a sign of strength and power for 'liberal women', and a way to prove themselves. Women smoked waterpipe as a way to express their emancipation and waterpipe smoking is one step forward toward gender equalization.

**Conclusions:** In-depth exploration of the social aspects of WTS in a specific context is crucial to understanding WTS behavior. This has significant implications on future interventions curbing the use of WTS.

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